

Jersey Evening Post

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# THE Weekend



## Martha My Dear

Comedy writer Martha MacDonald discusses her favourite comedians, finding inspiration in the Jersey fishing crisis and how a pimple helped to launch her poetry career

Photo: Max Burnett

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## The Weekend *The Big Read*

# Well versed in finding the funny side of life

At 24 Martha MacDonald already has an impressive number of writing credits to her name. As she prepares for her first live poetry performance later this month, she tells **Tom Ogg** about her early work, comic verse and becoming a full-time freelance writer in the middle of a global pandemic

**PLAYWRIGHT.** Comedy writer. Journalist. Martha MacDonald is certainly a woman of many talents.

And the talented 24-year-old will soon be adding another string to her creative bow as she makes her debut as a poetry performer this month.

'I can't remember not writing poetry,' says Martha, chatting during a visit to the JEP's offices.

'I've never performed it publicly, though, so people will have to come along and see if I can still maintain my confidence away from Instagram.'

As this comment suggests, Martha has thus far performed her poetry solely to camera and released the results on social media and her website.

This will all change on 10 and 11 June, however, when she takes to the stage at Grève de Lecq Barracks and recites a selection of her poetry alongside Jersey-

based poet Traci O'Dea and several other local talents.

'I think my poetry has undergone a big change recently from kind of angry, soppy stuff to more formal comedy poetry,' says Martha. 'I've been producing poems on a regular basis lately, partly as a means of keeping myself writing and engaged in topical stuff, and also to really hone my comedic style.'

And it is this comedic style that has recently garnered Martha much local attention after her amusing poetic take on Jersey's altercation with French fishermen – 'the war on whelks' as she calls it – caught the eyes and ears of Islanders.

'Writing poetry isn't an exact science – sometimes I get a flash of inspiration, sometimes it's a deliberate thing – but I think the fishing crisis just felt like something I had to write about. As a

Jersey writer it was interesting to see national reporters coming over and watching the situation unfold. They all seemed a bit befuddled by what was going on. It's not often that Jersey makes the national headlines.'

Although Martha already had a dedicated fanbase, French Fishing Row – or Fish and Ships as she later renamed it – has resulted in her writing talents being introduced to a far wider audience, both locally and further afield.

'It went down really well,' she says. 'It was a really interesting topic to cover and an awful lot of fun to write. It was also nice to do something with a bit more time pressure because obviously I had to put it out on the same day as everything was going on.'

Born and raised in Jersey, Martha is the daughter of local writer and performer Simon MacDonald, who previously penned the JEP's weekly children's pages (Simon Says), and it was her father's penchant for storytelling that instilled in Martha a deep love of reading and writing from an early age.

'My dad would do a lot of storytelling shows at various local heritage sites and run ghost tours and host events that spoke about the folklore of the Island. He would bring it all to life as a one-man band – and I was just captivated by it. I used to write short stories at school and I always felt like my dad was someone I could look up to in that sense,' she said.

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Aged 14, Martha entered a one-act play into a local playwriting competition – Spearpoint New Play Project – and, much to her surprise, she was chosen as one of the winners.

'I was there with the other playwrights and they were all adults, so that was a bit of a baptism of fire,' she laughs. 'They were probably very confused as to why there was this grumpy teenager in the room.'

Grumpy or not, the project represented an enviable opportunity for the teenage Martha, with her winning play



■ Freelance writer Martha MacDonald  
Picture: MAX BURNETT

subsequently being staged at the Jersey Arts Centre in a production directed by Natalie Ibu (currently the artistic director of UK-based theatre company Northern Stage) and performed by local actors.

'That was my first professional credit,' recalls Martha. 'I then did a residency for Paines Plough, which is a writing initiative in the UK, and which is behind the Come to Where I'm From project in which playwrights from all over the country write monologues about where they come from and what it means to them.'

In addition to this, Martha also wrote plays for Jersey-based writing company Plays Rough, before then spending three years in London studying comparative literature at King's College, during which time she continued to produce work for local theatre companies.

As is no doubt apparent, then, Martha is nothing if not prolific, and her desire to push herself with her writing has recently seen her branching out into the world of comedy.

'I think my writing has often had a sarcastic tone. My first play when I was 14 was understandably very angry, as you can imagine, but then I did a piece for Plays Rough commemorating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and it had a lot of dark humour in it. It featured three of Shakespeare's female heroines basically talking back to how they were presented in the play, which was a lot of fun.'

And one of Martha's more recent pieces of comedy writing was last month performed by London-based sketch company Next Level Sketch Comedy.

'I didn't have to perform, thank God,' she laughs. 'It was at The Miller pub-theatre in London Bridge and it was their first live show after lockdown, which was really exciting.'

Asked to name the comedians and writers who have most inspired her writing, Martha replies: 'Wow, that's a big question. I guess in terms of recent comedy, I wouldn't be a millennial woman if I didn't say Phoebe Waller-Briggs. Fleabag was such a landmark. And I've always loved French and Saunders, and more surreal comedy, such as Green Wing. I like to devour improv comedy. My brother and I used to watch repeats of Whose Line Is It Anyway? on Saturday



■ Martha studied comparative literature at King's College Picture: MAX BURNETT





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mornings. We loved all of that stuff.

The decision to merge her poetry talents with her comedy skills first came about after Martha discovered an old poem on her phone which she had written during her university days.

'I had written it about a big spot on my chin,' she laughs. 'When you have a spot of a certain size on your chin, it is all you can think about, especially at that age. I thought it was a funny poem, a bit silly, very much a work-in-progress, but it made me laugh. I thought it might make others laugh too.'

And this it promptly did: 'I realised that if I leant into that comedic tone, then it really seemed to connect with people and in a completely different way to my other poetry. [Comedy poetry] means that you can talk about uncomfortable topics with a lightness of touch and find joyous moments rather than taking everything so seriously. It was nice to write about that spot and take the mickey out of myself and, hopefully, make a few other people feel better in the process.'

Today, Martha works as a freelance writer, having left her job as a writer for Bailiwick Express in order to strike out on her own.

'I loved working as a journalist,' she said. 'It allowed me to realise how I could connect with lots of different people, and

how my sense of humour and people skills could help me with my poetry and comedy writing.'

Asked if she was wary of walking away from a job in the midst of a global pandemic, Martha says: 'It was certainly an intense and scary time, but it also felt like the right moment to take the plunge.'

It would seem to be working out well. In addition to her recent success with Fish and Ships, Martha was also among the local writers commissioned to write sketches for the Arts Centre's 'Scenes from a ...' project.

'It's great that, at a time when everyone has been so uncertain about the future of creative industries, [Arts Centre director] Daniel Austin has been so open and enthusiastic about making something happen. There has been a long history of the arts in Jersey being chronically underfunded, and so it is really refreshing to have someone saying "yes" to everything, no matter how ambitious. It has made me really hopeful about the arts.'

'I'm trying to keep my mind open to possibilities,' she continues.

'I've done so many different kinds of writing, from playwriting to journalism, but I think poetry feels like the closest to me and who I am.'

'I'm enjoying every minute of it.'

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